

# Becoming A Learning Community: Exploration of Concepts and Processes

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## Goals of this Interactive Session

- Part I: Defining a learning community
  - Features of effective learning communities
  - Principles of learning communities
- Part II: Becoming a learning community
  - Common barriers
  - Structural and organizational issues
  - Essential skills for learning communities

## Previous Experience with Learning Communities

## PART I:

### DEFINING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## What is a learning community?

### Learning Community

“Learning communities are developed where groups of people, linked geographically or by shared interest, collaborate and work in partnership to address their members’ learning needs... Learning communities facilitated through adult and community education are a powerful tool for social cohesion, community capacity building and social, cultural and economic development.”

Department of Education, 2003, p 12.

## Organizational Learning Communities

- Learning organizations
- Communities of Practice

## Learning Organizations

The Fifth Discipline  
Senge, 1990

## Learning Organizations

... organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”  
(Senge, Fifth Discipline, 1990)

## Disciplines of The Learning Organization

- Systems thinking\*
  - Building shared vision
  - Mental models
  - Team Learning
  - Personal mastery
- 
- \* the fifth discipline

## Systems Thinking

- Promotes a greater awareness of how the pieces fit together.
- Increased focus on the connections and dynamic nature of what you do.
  - Understand things that are distant in time and space
  - How we influence other pieces in a system
  - How our solutions will affect others

## Building Shared Vision

- Process to uncover shared pictures of the future that foster commitment, interest, enthusiasm, rather than compliance.
  - Develop vision that people are committed to based on their own personal vision
  - Vision emerges from relationships and interactions of personal visions about future they want to create

## Understanding Mental Models

- Uncover the deeply ingrained assumptions, beliefs or even images that influence how we see and act in the world.
  - Often unconscious, hidden, unstated
  - Increased awareness and shared mental models leads to more reflective, mindful understanding and generative learning
  - Increase ability to reflect (take time and understand) and inquire (openly share views and learn about each other's assumptions).

## Team Learning

- Starts with dialogue, the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine "thinking together."
  - Team learning builds on vision and, through use of effective processes, leads to collective thought and learning.

## The Wisdom of Teams

- Wisdom of Crowds: James Surowiecki, 2004 (Doubleday)
  - Premise: under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent and are often smarter than the smartest people in them."
  - Wise crowds need:
    - Diversity of opinion
    - Independence of members from one another
    - Decentralization
    - A good method for aggregating opinions

## If Four Conditions are Met...

- "A crowds collective intelligence will produce better outcomes than a small group of experts, even if members don't know all of the facts or choose individually to act irrationally."

## Personal Mastery - Enhancing Capacity of Individual Members

- Build commitment to and capacity for learning in its members.
  - We learn from our experiences and continually improve our ability to practice the different disciplines.
  - We become more effective at what we do and how we do it.

## Communities of Practice

Cultivating Communities of Practice  
Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002

## Community of Practice

“Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

(Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002)

## Key Dimensions of Communities of Practice

- Domain
- Community
- Practice

## Domain

- People organize around a domain of knowledge (or topic) that brings them together. Members identify with the domain of knowledge and joint understanding that emerges from shared knowledge.

## Community

- People function as a community through relationships of mutual engagement. They interact regularly and engage in joint activities that build relationships and mutual trust.

## Practice

- Build capacity in practice by developing shared knowledge, frameworks, ideas, tools, and resources that community members share.

## Summary

Key Features and Principles  
of  
Learning Communities

## Features of Effective Learning Communities

- Informal, loose affiliations
- Supportive and shared leadership
- Collective learning and creativity
- Shared values and vision
- Supportive conditions
- Shared personal practice
- Respecting diversity of experience, expertise
- Enhanced (group and individual) potential and outcomes

## Learning Communities Are Not The Same As...

- Project teams
- Work groups or teams
- Task forces

## A few simple principles...

- Learning happens through interactions and relationships in networks of others who are experiencing and working on the same challenges and tasks.
- People learn from other people; with the process leading to better practice and an increased sense of community.
- There is value in loose, informal networks of people who are excited to learn with and from others.

## PART II:

### BECOMING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

## Essential Capacities for Becoming a Learning Community

- Awareness of barriers to organizational learning
- Ability to create initial and ongoing conditions that enhance learning, trust, openness, honesty

## Barriers to Organizational Learning

- Silo style of work and work groups
- Unsupportive leadership
- Lack of legitimacy
- Failure to build in time and structures for learning
- Defensive communication patterns
- Limited ability for reflection and generative learning
- Lack of the 6 "C's" in group members

## Creating Conditions to Enhance Learning Communities

- Leadership support
- Identifying structure to initiate and sustain a learning community
- Committed person to coordinate and bring energy to the community
- Increase skills and capacity for open, honest dialogue and inquiry

## Leadership and Learning Communities

- A learning community cannot be driven from leaders at the top.
- Leadership support
  - Legitimization
  - Resources
  - Time
- Three essential types of “leaders” in building learning organizations (Senge):
  - local line leaders: sanction and lead through participation.
  - executive leaders: protectors, mentors, partners
  - community-builders: access to many parts of an organization, understand informal “communities”

## Structure of Learning Communities

- Group size: large enough to enhance diversity, small enough to enhance member involvement
- Composition: heterogeneous or homogeneous
- Mode: face to face, virtual
- Leadership: shared, facilitative

## Skills to Enhance the Capacity of Learning Communities

- Ability to handle dissension and disagreement
- Personal and group reflection
- Discussion and dialogue
- Inquiry and advocacy

## Importance of Dialogue and Discussion

“Ability to carry on “learningful” conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people espouse their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others.”

(Senge, 1990, p 9)

## Supporting Personal and Group Reflection and Communication

### FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE OF...

- dialogue and discussion
  - **Dialogue:** free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, deep listening to one another, suspending one’s own views.
  - **Discussion:** different views are presented and defended – search for best view to support decisions.

## Supporting Reflection and Communication cont.

### FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE OF...

- inquiry and advocacy
  - Inquiry: openly share views and ask questions to understand each others' assumptions
  - Advocacy: present and argue for a particular viewpoint

## Learning Skillful Discussion

(Ross, Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, 1994)

Goal: learn skills to reach decisions mindfully

- Traditional discussion undermines learning
  - oriented toward advocacy – people discuss to win
- Need to broaden and focus scope of conversation with intention of coming to closure (decision, reach agreement, identify priorities)

## Skillful Discussion cont.

- Openness and trust
- Encourage and reward new perspectives
- Need ample time and a focused agenda
- Importance of diversity

## What It Takes to Create and Sustain A Learning Community

(Brown and Isaacs, Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, 1994, p 508-517)

- Capability: have the skills, knowledge and personal qualities to renew themselves and reinvent a future through skillful discussion
- Commitment: people are an integral part of creating a community they value together
- Contribution: members must see how their work contributes to community; provide opportunities for diversity of talents and contributions

## Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities cont.

- Continuity: develop an institutional memory, careful orientation of new members
- Collaboration: develop interdependence, share vision and strategy, free flow of information, able to act autonomously to achieve common goals
- Conscience: guiding principles, ethics, values (e.g., trust, mutual respect)

## Summary

- Becoming a learning community takes...
  - Tremendous commitment from individual members and the collective
  - Willingness to follow principles and practices of learning communities
  - Time
  - Patience
  - Humility
  - A strong belief in the value of the process and its end result